



# Past in Review

## Amphibian Engineers in World War II

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Loaded with combat troops, landing craft of the 542nd Engineer Boat and Shore Regiment head for Red Beach, Tanahmerah Bay, New Guinea, on April 22, 1944 (U.S. Army photo).

In 1944, GEN Douglas MacArthur described the war in the Southwest Pacific as "an Engineer's war" because of the Engineer contributions to the success of air and amphibious operations. The role that Engineers played in supporting the air war against Japan is relatively well known, but the contribution of Army amphibian Engineers is less familiar.

From the beginning of World War II, the United States knew that it would have to conduct many landing operations against Germany and Japan. To support these missions, the Corps of Engineers created the Engineer Amphibian Command (EAC) at Camp Edwards, MA. The EAC trained and equipped six Engineer Amphibian Brigades, which were later renamed Engineer Special Brigades. The 1st Special Brigade participated in the Allied landings on the North African coast and later supported the amphibious operations in Sicily and southern Italy. In June 1944, the 1st, 5th, and 6th Engineer Special Brigades operated Omaha and Utah beaches during the Normandy Invasion.

In Europe the special brigades were primarily shore Engineers, but in MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA), the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Special Brigades were both boat and shore

units. Each special brigade in SWPA had three Boat and Shore Regiments which landed men, equipment, and supplies, and also transported them in a fleet of small Engineer-operated landing craft.

During 1942 and 1943, MacArthur's forces moved along northern coast of New Guinea in a series of hard-fought overland and shore-to-shore amphibious assaults. In October 1943, the 2nd Engineer Special Brigade landed Australian troops near the strategically important village of Finschhafen. A detachment of the brigade's 532nd Boat and Shore Regiment remained on the beach to help the Australians defend it from seaborne counterattack.

As dawn approached on October 17, the defenders heard the faint sound of boats gliding toward the beach. PVT Nathan Van Noy Jr. and CPL Stephen Popa rushed to their .50-caliber machine gun position just a few yards from the water line.

Slowly, the silhouettes of Japanese landing barges came into view. The Australians and American Engineers farther up the beach opened fire, but Van Noy, the gunner, waited until the barges dropped their ramps. As the Japanese stormed onto the beach, Van Noy opened fire, killing many of the invaders. A hail of Japanese grenades

shattered Van Noy's leg and wounded Popa. In spite of their wounds, the two Engineers continued to fire.

After the Allied troops had repulsed the Japanese raid, they found Van Noy dead, his finger still on the trigger of his empty machine gun, and Popa severely wounded. Popa received a Silver Star and Van Noy became the first Engineer enlisted man in World War II to receive the Medal of Honor.

The Engineer Special Brigades participated in many of the remaining campaigns in the Pacific, including Leyte, Luzon, and Okinawa. In both Europe and the Pacific, these specially trained and equipped Engineer units made an important contribution to the success of American amphibious operations.

### Suggestions for further reading:

BG William F. Heavey, *Down Ramp! The Story of Army Amphibian Engineers*

HQ Army Forces, Pacific, Office of the Chief Engineer, *Engineers of the Southwest Pacific 1941-1945*, Volume IV: *Amphibian Engineer Operations*

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